

Belonging

Belonging

Finding Tribes of Meaning

Alison Weihe



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Disclaimer

I love the English language. I love its nuances and its symbolism. I love how words deepen the meaning of life. I have always loved books. I love the words language gives us, providing us with the ability to paint pictures and extract meaning. I love metaphors and symbolism; they unite us in our common humanity.

I am just an ordinary woman trying to make sense of my journey.

Tributes to Alison's journey

A truly awe-inspiring, engaging read of a soul on a journey to discover her 'soul tribes'. This read is an earnest portrayal of overcoming barriers such as imposter syndrome to discover the authentic self; finding life's purpose; and living a vital and rewarding life.

Alison's book is a refreshing read. This networking aficionado discovers her purpose of bringing together other like-minded souls for greater synergy, which is exactly how I connected with Alison, and we have enjoyed meaningful collaboration ever since.

Kudos, Alison, on capturing soul-baring inspiration in this amazing piece of work, which is truly an ode to the indomitable human spirit.

- Anton Thayalan
Chief Evangelist – Luminary Learning Solutions,
Sri Lanka

I was introduced to Alison in 2021 through the Coaches and Speakers Mentorship Programme. Alison and Jabu Zwane were the facilitators of the programme.

Alison's ability to captivate the audience with her storytelling methodology had a huge impact on me and on my coaching career.

It was so easy to associate with her; she was never afraid to show her vulnerability to us during the programme.

Alison, may everything you touch turn to gold; thank you for sharing yourself with us.

- Rubina Alexander
Young Entrepreneur

Alison has allowed me to be a part of her transformational journey. In *Belonging*, you get to be part of that journey as Alison shares openly and from the heart, a heart that you will find is full of courage and love. *Belonging* is your opportunity to learn how to find your own voice and create a fearless and fulfilling life.

- Graham Mitchell
Founder of GROW Business Coaching

Watching Alison's journey has been both inspiring and powerful. We met at a time when she was just stepping into her power – I recognized it in her as I had recently gone through a similar transformation. The way inspiration works is a funny thing: I inspired her, then she inspired me. Watching this woman so boldly claim her voice, power and courage helped me see my 'can't speak during the pandemic' excuse for what it was. Because of her, I got back in the game and I'm so happy for the community and connection acts of courage create.

- Christy Renee Stehle
Create Courage Within
Author, Mindvalley Speaker, Coach,
Atlanta, Georgia

If you've ever felt lonely, like an outsider or not enough, Alison's book will speak straight into your soul and help you to heal.

Alison uses storytelling as a medium to bring healing, hope and inspiration. She walks the talk, has lived the journey and sees her purpose to speak and write for those who need it on a soul level.

Alison's work will bring transformation into your life, and you can't help but be inspired and moved by the words she writes and speaks. I would love to invite you to take the first step by reading this book and then sharing it with others.

- Yoke van Dam

Founder of Y-Connect, Team and Leadership Expert,
South Africa

In August 2021, I reluctantly accepted an invitation to a personal brand talk. The keynote speaker for the day was Alison Weihe. Little did I know that I was to have a collision with destiny. I was blown away by Alison's story and, for the first time in my life, felt a deep connection to my own destiny.

Alison inspired me to own my own story and use my voice to fulfil my purpose; to own the fact that I am an original and one of a kind; and, more importantly, to share my story with those around me, because it will change their world.

A BIG thank you, Alison, for unlocking and igniting the gift within me.

- Eleanor Bloem

Founder/CEO, MindFuse Event Strategist,
South Africa

Alison's amazing story, which I was privileged to edit, inspired me to pen a poem for the first time in 20 years. This demonstrates the power of storytelling to inspire.

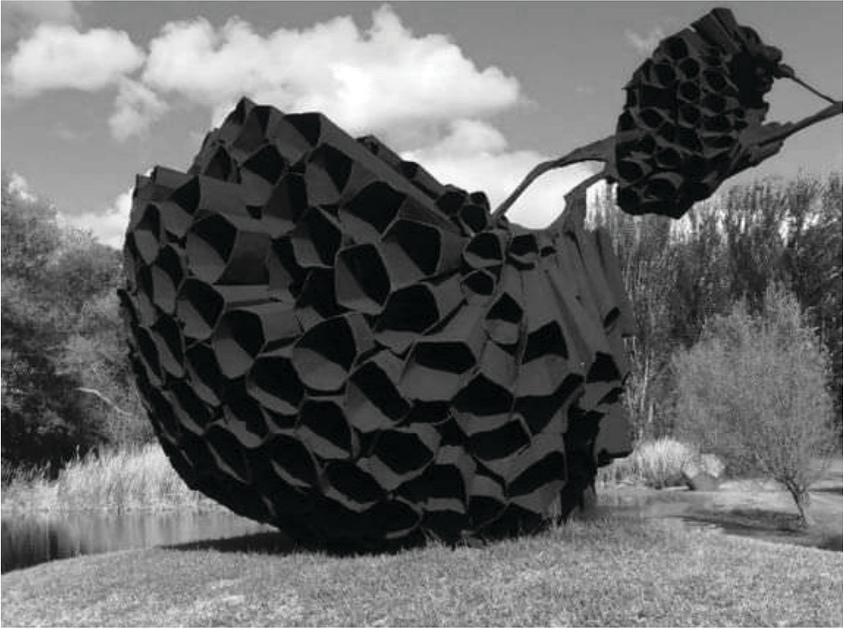
BELONGING

Facing life's challenges is increasingly tough
Competing, being measured, never feeling enough
Keeping head above water, seeking the light
Praying that one day all will be right.

Finding a tribe of meaning is like coming home
Feeling you belong, that you're not all alone
Kindred spirits surround you, you realize at last
You've found love and acceptance, you've built on your past.

Being, belonging, becoming all you can be
Finding yourself, you're finally free.

- Denise Ansell, 2022
Editor and Writer



Dark Codex

Credit to Artists

This award-winning sculpture by our dear friend, Richard John Forbes, symbolizes for me, the bringing of darkness into the light, both personally and politically. There is light and dark in all of us.

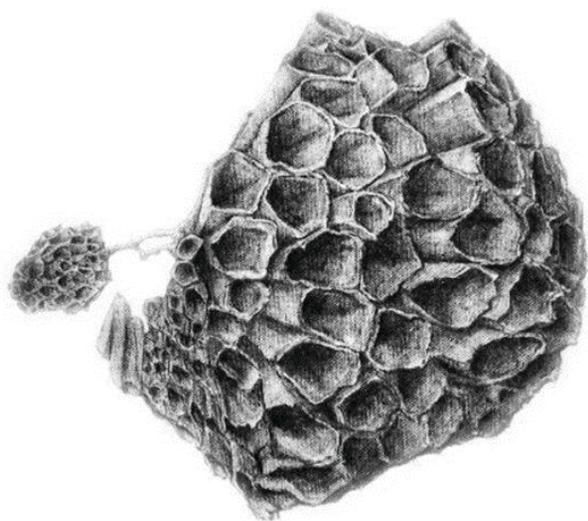
Boxing, labelling, judging and stereotyping are all limiting beliefs designed to protect us. We are not either/or, we are AND. That is the power of paradoxical thinking.

We are not black and white, and neither is the world. We are all literally thousands of shades of metaphorical greys.

Artist: Richard John Forbes

Medium: The combination of medium was Spanish Plaster, black pigment and latex.

At first glance, Dark Codex seems abstract, yet the sculpture reveals an attentiveness to nature in its organic geometries. Constructed of stacked hexagonal structures reminiscent of those in paper-thin wasp nests, the sculpture's components nestle one another, creating individual pockets of darkness. The orderliness of these dark spaces provides a clue to the mysterious title, Dark Codex. The word 'codex' refers to early, highly valued, handwritten manuscripts created on sheets of vellum. They store knowledge. Dark Codex thus refers to the process of ordering information, here an attempt to grasp the elusive nature of darkness, its ability to conceal, its ineffability: we are only starting to grapple with its hidden power as we work with the concepts of shadows, dark matter and dark energy.



A line drawing of the sculpture introduces each chapter of this book. The artist is **Hester Reeve**, Reader in Fine Arts in the Department of Art and Design at Sheffield Hallam University.

As Lisa Nichols, the inspirational speaker, teacher and author, says:

The secret to life is
embracing the light and the dark,
both our magnificence AND our
shadows simultaneously, all the
time, in every moment
in every day.

In the words of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize winner:

When we see others as the enemy, we risk becoming what we hate.
When we oppress others, we end up oppressing ourselves. All of our
humanity is dependent upon recognizing the humanity in others.

Embracing the light and the dark in all of us is a lifelong journey of *becoming* and *belonging*. Let's make it a joyful ride!

To my charismatic father, Elgin
To my dearest father, who became 'Gabba' to so many of us.
You always knew I had a book inside me.
Well, here it is.
It took another 30 years of becoming in order to truly
understand belonging.
Thank you for gifting me my voice through my words.
You always said to me, 'Don't worry about the details and focus on
the big picture.'
Gabba, I found my bigger picture later in life, only to realize that it
was but the beginning of a whole new journey.

To my beautiful, gentle and incredibly brave mother, Rose
You did not have an easy life at all. You lived it with great courage
and compassion.
You taught me the true meaning of life, even in death.

This book is a love letter to:

- My beautiful family that has been both my healing and my expansion in so many ways.
- My father and my mother who gifted me so much. I could never perceive the magnitude of their gifts before.
- My extended family who embraced me with such love and warmth.
- All the people who have touched my life and shaped my journey of *becoming*.
- The factionalized, challenged but incredibly beautiful country of South Africa, which birthed, moulded and shaped me.
- All the people who struggle to love themselves, to embrace the fullness of who they are intended to be.
- The partners of these people, who see their pain.
- Those who feel that they are not *enough*. The misfits, the nerds, the geeks, the rebels, the creatives, the misunderstood.
- Those who often feel, or who have felt, so utterly alone in the world.
- This breathtakingly beautiful planet that allows us to inhabit its cities, its mountains, its valleys, its oceans and its skies, across countries, continents and cultures.
- Our common humanity to find the kindness in one another.

This book is a love letter to the tribes that helped me find and grow my voice; the voice of an ordinary woman who discovered the joy of living an extraordinary life.

Above all, this book is a love letter from my heart to yours.

- Alison Jessica Weihe

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Foreword

The first time I heard Alison speak was at her house, where she and her husband Friedel hosted a group of professional speakers. I was immediately touched by her passionate, connective and articulate manner of communication.

I thought she was careful in crafting her sentences, along with a measure of careful confidence. After some time of getting to know her as a colleague, friend and business partner, I understood why. Her cautious, passionate and compassionate manner of communicating is deeply rooted in her self-awareness and social intelligence.

I later understood that she practices what she terms as Identity Intelligence, a term that made me aware of how my identity frames how I relate to others. Reading this book has been equally a reiteration of those earlier observations, with even more intentionality and a refreshing level of intellectual intensity. Alison is truly an intelligent, soulful and emotionally committed linguist, with a powerful, needful message of healing and courageous transformation.

I can confidently say that my relationship with both her and Friedel has been, for me, just as much of a journey of finding my tribe with them, with reference to the title of this book. The book epitomizes her unpretentious, reflective and authentically generous self. She generously shares with us her vulnerabilities in a

transparent and courageous manner. She reflects a journey of self-love and self-discovery in a deeply profound way.

Reading the book leaves me with a lot to reflect on, many courageous dares and gratitude to have had the privilege of being part of her tribe.

-Jabulani Zwane,
Founder of the Mindset Institute

Prologue

It was a balmy Thursday evening at the end of 2020, a small window at the end of a year of lockdown that had changed us all.

I had arranged a small gathering of speaker friends at our home – friends who had become my inner tribe and a source of inspiration during that momentous year.

I spoke about how much their camaraderie and courage had grown me. I remember saying, ‘I am not really a speaker’, although I was already on the committee of the Johannesburg Chapter of the Professional Speakers Association of Southern Africa (PSASA).

At the end of the evening, an amazing man called Jabulani Zwane called me to one side. He had been deep in conversation with my husband, Friedel, for most of the evening. I had never seen my husband open up to a total stranger like that. He had an uncanny presence about him.

I had been following Jabu for some time. His posts were always profoundly resonant. He was the Founder of a global Mindset Institute based in South Africa.

That night, Jabu looked into my eyes and said to me, ‘Alison, what is this thing about you not being a speaker? I have heard you speak. Where does that come from?’

We started a conversation that has never ended.

And so began the final piece of my finding my voice.

ONE



Peering into my Soul

THEN AND NOW

As I started to write the rough notes for the first chapter of this book, I glanced down at the diary in which I was writing, and there in the bottom corner of the page was a quote by Tony Robbins, 'The only impossible journey is the one you never begin.'

Those words raised gooseflesh on my naked arm; it wasn't just the crisp night air curling into autumn. I wasn't always the woman you see on the cover, so radiant and colourful. Courageous. I don't know how I got this lucky, but I did. Was it mystery or was it manifestation? Maybe it was both.

I have an extraordinary love affair with my husband of 28 years, Friedel. We have two kind and caring adult children who want to make a difference in the world. We live in a charming, rustic farmhouse surrounded by trees and nature, even though we live on

the fringe of the urban belt of the bustling city of Johannesburg. Yet once you sweep through the gates, you enter a world of tranquil green nature, despite the odd cacophony of African hadeda birds, squawking in wild abandon.

We are busy renovating and creating a soulful retreat space at our lake house, two hours outside Johannesburg. As I write these words, the white egrets saunter, languidly trawling the muddy shoreline for food. It is a beautiful dance of swaying white necks that enchants me. We have been renovating for a while now. We love creating beautiful spaces. It has become not only the strapline of our company, but a symbol of our life together.

Over 23 years, we have built up an expansive and creative company by crafting products for outdoor spaces. During that time, we met many fascinating people. We have learnt untold lessons, many of them nowhere to be seen in any entrepreneurial diploma or degree.

We have a management team who have poured their lives into deepening the soul brand we created all those years ago. They have poured their own souls into their own unfolding journey of *becoming*, allowing me to focus more on my coaching, writing and speaking journey.

Reaching my sixth decade, I look and feel younger than I did at 50. I am healthy, strong and fit after changing my lifestyle dramatically 11 years ago. Now, moving is part of my identity; the very core of my being.

It wasn't always so. I used to be overweight, deeply insecure, depressed, distrustful, ashamed, guilt-ridden and obsessed with what people thought of me. At times, this made me a person that was not really nice.

Now I live in such joy and abandon, and have such deep intimacy with life itself. I live in my body, not only in my head. I wake up in the early morning with purpose, grateful for every new day.

Having walked a long road of trying to find myself and my purpose, today I find that spirituality means nothing more to me than living in spirit. That means living in awareness. Awareness of the impact of my spirit on others and being responsible for all my choices: from what I eat to what media I consume; and how to make my remaining time on this earth as meaningful as possible.

I am not a great believer in goal setting. It feels like a diet to me. I spent years battling eating disorders and an overwhelming hole in my soul, as I never felt 'good enough'. Now I believe in visioning and living in flow.

However, my greatest fear in writing this book remained, 'What will people think if I'm honest, real and raw?'

I have grappled with seeking approval my whole life, and with being dissociated and judgemental about my body. People find that hard to believe when they see me now. The woman they see today is an entirely different person, whole, confident and strong.

Sharing the truth of my struggles is both terrifying and liberating. It is forcing me to tell my story out of love, not fear. As one of my wonderful young mentors, Nicole Gibson (she is now 28!) says, 'Every decision comes down to one simple question: is this love-based or fear-based?'

I expose my fears out of love. My love for all the years I wasted living in so much fear. I felt so weighed down by everyone's opinions all the time, for so many decades. Now, I choose to embrace becoming not fearless, but fearing less.

In fearing less, I came to love more. The more I learnt to love myself, the more I lived in the present moment. The more I learnt to love myself, the less judgemental I became; the less I was inclined to box and label others. Although I was still scared of being boxed or labelled.

One day, while writing this book, I sat in my discomfort. I asked my German book coach, Katja, 'What if my children and others are

embarrassed by my honesty about sensuality and intimacy? What if I write about making love in a cave and they cringe?’

There was a long pause. Tears welled up in her eyes; I was taken aback. I had not seen her emotional before. She said, ‘Ali, my parents haven’t been intimate for years. I can only dream about having parents with that level of love and intimacy after 28 years together.’

And in that moment, I knew I had to speak my truth. In doing so, I would be living my brand of fearing less and loving more.

I hope you find some joy in my story. I hope you will savour the sour tang and the sweetness that poured forth from the lessons I’ve learnt. I hope you will sense the shift in my spirit from despair to exhilaration. Not as a manic, temporary high, but rather a considered and measured constant state of greater happiness and inner peace. A life rich in meaning.

Above all, I hope this book will make you feel less alone.

AN EXTRAORDINARY WEEKEND

It was a Saturday night at the Vaal Dam, at our little farmhouse on the lake. It is our sacred space alongside our family home in the city, which we had lovingly renovated over 15 years.

Now we were creating another beautiful space, a soulful retreat. A ‘little house on the prairie’, nestled between the warm yellow wild grasses and the silent ebony water. Reflections from the lights of a distant township of the South African Free State made tracks of yellow across the dark water.

The air was still. I heard the howl of a jackal in the distance, close to where the gumtrees hugged the silent shoreline. The old windmill creaked as the breeze lifted it, the warm night air sensuously cloaking my bare skin.

I walked from the cottage to the house in the moonlight, naked in my wedge heels, a kimono loosely slung over my shoulders, to fetch the photograph albums I had lovingly created to celebrate my husband Friedel's 60th birthday.

There were five albums about various aspects of his life, from the early years to dating, our wedding and the early years of family; from raising a family to growing a company, having fun and travelling. As I clutched the albums and walked back to the cottage, I realized that the pleasure lay not so much in his response, but in the doing. In scouring old photograph albums and walking down memory lane. The pleasure lay in realizing that we had indeed created an extraordinary life. An extraordinary love affair. In an extraordinary land.

We had recently been engaged in an online programme run by Mindvalley, one of the largest and most influential personal development companies in the world. It was called the Lifebook Programme, run by Jon and Missy Butcher, whom we had met in Tallinn, Estonia a few years previously at a Mindvalley Global Summit.

Jon and Missy captivated us. They were honest and real, onstage and offstage. They had spoken of their passionate love affair of more than 30 years. We bumped into them one balmy night in Tallinn. I was wearing a long, coral, silk dress with a coral and cream-coloured pashmina as we ambled through the charming, cobbled streets of this castle-walled, medieval town. It was after we had heard them speak a few times on different topics at the summit. We found them riveting and their experiences resonated deeply with our journey.

When we saw Jon and Missy on the street, we laughingly said, 'We are like an older version of you, as a couple', and Missy said, with a twinkle in her eye, 'I know, I can see.' She was so open and

warm, with not an ounce of ‘speakerdom’ about her. She was wearing a long, colourful, silk kimono dress, which showed the subtle sensuality of her athletic body; she seemed so alive yet so gentle.

Jon exuded such radiance and a depth of insight about the world. I was mesmerized by their radiance and their clarity of life. So, when Friedel and I recently did their online programme over two months, our Lifebook nights became date nights.

On these nights I wore lingerie and cooked simple, delicious and beautifully presented meals that we ate in our sprawling farmhouse in its open-plan dining room and kitchen. All lit with the glow of candles and accompanied by the haunting sounds of acoustic guitar and romantic love songs.

The previous Covid year (2020), the year of lockdown, had made us both more romantic, spontaneous and sensual. We were living in gratitude for one another; for this amazing life we had created; and for this amazing journey of *becoming* that we had been on. That lockdown year, when the world paused, we really got to understand the meaning of life. Of all life and humanity. It took the world to pause, the skies to go quiet and our patterns to be interrupted for us to go within. I think we all started to feel more and to appreciate more.

We appreciated our families, our time, our neighbourhoods, our health workers, our colleagues, our support systems and our inner tribes. Suddenly, we as South Africans were a part of a global phenomenon. All of our lives became unpredictable. In a way, they always had been. Only now we felt its knife-edge. Nothing was certain.

And so began a journey of going within, and growing deeper together as a couple. We called our Covid year our ‘lockdown love affair’. Friedel proudly told a close friend the other day that he had

taken many photographs of me in a variety of beautiful cocktail dresses and lingerie during the 84-odd nights of strict lockdown. His friend seemed quite intrigued by this idea, but his wife looked mortified.

The look on his wife's face was the same look that I would have had 10 years earlier. It was a look of shame, disdain and judgement. I would have called such a comment frivolous and superficial. I would have thought our relationship was sordid, not sacred. I would have been utterly mortified that my husband might expect that of me. I had serious things to do in the world. My barbed response would have been, 'How did people get to be so self-indulgent?'

If only they had known what it had taken for me to reach this point. If only they had known that I had battled eating disorders, yo-yo dieting, becoming larger, smaller, larger, smaller, 20 kg up and down. Flirting dangerously on the fringes of anorexia and then morphing into erratic bulimia, for almost a decade.

I had been on a decade-long journey to become more comfortable in my skin. To be able to walk half-naked in the moonlight was not a quick rite of passage. It felt like a lifetime to become not only healthy, fit and strong, but to be able to create a loving relationship with food and my body.

The more I learnt to love and accept my body, the closer I felt to God; the more comfortable I became in my own skin; the closer Friedel and I became. There was a sacred intimacy that we had never experienced before.

And so that night I made my way back to the cottage and laid out the albums on the fresh white linen, placing them amongst rose petals I had brought from our home in Johannesburg. When Friedel saw the albums, he picked up the first one, 'An Extraordinary Life: The Early Years'.

There were pictures of his early life he had never even seen. Some of our family had lovingly collaborated with me in my quest

to unearth some of the legacy of his grandparents and parents. Early childhood holidays in the home-made rooftop tent his father had lovingly constructed, cramming four children and camping gear into a small station wagon. Friedel teared up as the images evoked memories that only he could fathom.

Why had I titled the albums 'An Extraordinary Life'?

A month or so earlier, before the albums were born and before my husband's birthday, we were busy reaching the end of the two-month Lifebook Programme. In the two months of the programme, we had to dig deep and face ourselves, raw and unedited.

One morning, we reflected on the programme we were just completing. My husband and I were enjoying early-morning coffee, in bed. We were watching the wild pigeons and an African go-away bird feast on old fruit and wild seed, as is our early morning meditative ritual.

Friedel said, 'Ali, I have something to show you.' He was quite animated, more than his usual quiet, contemplative self. He pulled out a piece of paper lying on his bedside table. It was a Wheel of Life assessment tool that he had explored and implemented during the process of doing the Lifebook Programme. It was constructed so that people doing the programme could see which aspects of their life they wanted to work on. Constructed into 12 categories ranging from health, values and parenting; to financial freedom and spiritual growth, it allowed participants to see where they were on the Wheel of Life. Health was the foundation of all other categories. That aligned with our perspective. Our health, our intimacy and our purpose had become our wealth.

Friedel had discovered that his overall score on all categories of life reflected an extraordinary life, a life achieved only by a really small percentage of the global population. It was based on significant scientific analyses and numerous studies across cultures and continents. The score was measured not only on financial

security, which is the focus of many other programmes, but on the fulfilment of life, of purpose and of love.

‘I have an Extraordinary Life,’ he declared with amazement and obvious delight. His smile moved from his bearded lips to the crinkled laughter lines around his eyes, symbolic of the years we had lived and laughed alongside one another. A life so deeply drawn, like water from a well.

He said, ‘And the love category was my highest score. My love for you and our family.’

How had I got so lucky? Was it destiny or fate? Was it grace? Or had I gained some tools of wisdom along the road less travelled?

Lifebook had forced us to reflect on ourselves in a new way, unearthing and uncovering. Friedel and I had discovered that we were indeed living an extraordinary life. We had never, ever perceived our lives to be like that before.

At that moment, it all started to make sense. All the signs that I had been given to tell my story. To tell our story. Just as Jon and Missy Butcher had inspired so many others to fulfil their Lifebooks and rewrite their stories. We had never been driven by money; we had always been driven by the pursuit of excellence. We were driven to be ‘fulfillionaires’, to quote Skip Kelly, a friend of ours in the Mindvalley community. To be fulfilled by doing work of meaning and by supporting causes that really made a difference. ‘Fulfillionaires’ were rooted not in money, but in meaning.

SIGNPOSTS

But where had the signposts begun? They started in 2017, three years before Covid changed the world. The signs started with a whisper in my soul. I was sitting on a cold, hard concrete floor in

the meditation hall at the end of a 10-day silent meditation retreat in Worcester.

My daughter, Karla, had cajoled, persuaded and eventually insisted that I do this silent retreat. She had done it and said that it was life-changing and shape-shifting. She was right.

At the time, I was at a crossroads in my life. I had been at the coalface as an entrepreneur in the construction industry for 20 years. I had battled shingles for a while, and decided to leave the corporate space so that I could figure out the next phase of my life.

A dear friend of mine, a coach in the United States, had said to me, 'Ali, if you are no longer meant to be where you are, it will become uncomfortable for you to stay there.'

And that is precisely what had happened. I had a vibrant and energized management team that helped Friedel and I build a world-class brand. I could see that they wanted to put their own stamp on the business and take it to the next level. I sensed that I was holding them back and that I should give them the freedom to make their mark. We'd been grooming them for eight years. They were more than ready. I knew it was time.

I was free to do what I wanted. To be honest, it wasn't easy to let go. I'd always been in control and driven to succeed. With no goal, I felt a bit unmoored, but a part of me was embracing this new-found freedom. It occurred to me that I was now unfettered by the previous responsibilities that had weighed me down. I was free to chart my own journey and my own destiny. To paddle my solitary canoe through tributaries unexplored, branching off from the wide river that had defined my life.

I had never experienced anything like the silent retreat before. Whilst I had dabbled in yoga retreats and women's self-development circles many times, nothing had challenged my body, mind and soul like this retreat.

It was here, in the stillness, that I felt God whisper to me, 'Alison, you need to write your story.'

In that moment, something ignited in me. Something had shifted and been dislodged. I could feel entrenched patterns being untethered and released. I knew I had to write my story. Maybe it could help someone else feel less judged, less alone. Only there was another voice dismissing the whisper. Why would anyone be interested in **my** story? I was just an ordinary woman. I did not have a PhD in Emotional Intelligence. I had not overcome the dramatic hurdles many of my friends had. I had led a privileged life on so many levels. I was not famous. I had achieved nothing outstanding in particular, I had just lived a journey of growth. I had become an entrepreneur, not by design, but by default. I had always thought I would marry a farmer and live a life close to nature and to animals. Why would anyone be interested in my stories? The whisper grew louder. 'It's precisely because you **are** ordinary. You are just like every woman. The world needs to hear the voices of ordinary people. That is your **why**.'

After the retreat, I arrived home and told Karla about my epiphany. She was overjoyed. I think she was terrified that I'd bale out of the retreat, but I had seen it through. It felt like she was proud of me for doing something that would bring us closer together. Something shifted for us that day.

Truth be told, I hadn't always been a warm, loving, happy, easy-going mother. I had been a stressed, driven entrepreneur, often impatient, lurching from one achievement to the next, with multiple projects on the go. A hamster on the treadmill of life.

After the retreat I felt quieter, centred and certain. I decided to study as a coach and completed a coaching diploma. It unlocked a part of my soul that I had always loved and lived in, but never formalized. I had always encouraged my staff, and loved seeing

people grow and blossom in the time that they passed through our company walls and the spaces in-between. A moment in time when they had stretched, learnt and become, before flying the nest to another place of learning.

Following the coaching diploma, my first foray into published writing was in 2019, when a friend encouraged me to write a chapter in a book about ordinary people who had experienced shifting moments in their lives. It felt aligned. I had met the remarkable publisher of this book, the Canadian serial entrepreneur, JB Owen, in Tallinn, alongside Jon and Missy Butcher, and many other thought leaders and Mindvalley tribe members.

I found JB's confidence mesmerizing. The first time I laid eyes on her, she was sitting on a beanbag in front of the auditorium in Tallinn. We were waiting for the next speaker to appear. The auditorium was vast, modern and beautiful. As someone who has always loved architecture, it was a work of art. This old gas station, reclaimed into an edgy, modern conference venue, blended the old and the new worlds. It was almost symbolic of the messages of its global speakers.

JB and I started chatting. She was wide open and warm. Her kids were there. Her son had the same olive-toned complexion as she did and her daughter had delicate freckles and strawberry hair that reminded me of our daughter Karla.

I remember at the end of that session, JB moved closer to the stage to record a video of what she had learnt. She seemed so confident and at ease in front of the camera. Only later did I discover that she had a background in film and television. I remember turning to Friedel and saying, 'I can't imagine what it must feel like to be so confident and so at ease with the world.' Friedel and I were both quite shy, and it felt rather intimidating to be in an auditorium of a thousand people from 53 different countries.

People were hugging one another. They had come to know one another at other Mindvalley events. It was a global tribe of such warmth and openness; no pretence, no armour. For me, it was both enticing and terrifying. I still felt gawky and inept. Despite having helped to build up a company, I felt like an infant in the personal development space.

So, when JB invited me to attend her wedding to Peter in the Tallinn town square, I felt honoured. We stood shyly on the fringes as JB appeared in a beautiful, old, horse-drawn carriage. After sweeping into the town square, picture-book perfect, with fairy-tale buildings surrounding its cobbled centre piazza, she alighted from the carriage in a pink ball gown. Her beautiful family of blended children ushered her to the church steps. There, Vishen, the founder of Mindvalley, told the story of JB and Peter's love affair and officiated at the wedding ceremony. It was enchanting.

After their wedding, we got to know JB and Peter even better. I suspect that some of her charismatic confidence began to creep into the veneer of self-doubt I carried around me.

Many other speakers at Mindvalley told their life stories, creating a world of intimate honesty and resonance. Their courage became my courage. It deepened the spiritual dimension of our marriage. The intimacy of our minds and not just our bodies. Becoming whole. The stirring in my soul told me it was time to start writing.

Once I started writing, the words poured out of my soul. A love letter of overcoming a lifetime of self-doubt to inspire others to claim their life and their legacy. As the words plopped out on the page, it felt slightly cathartic, but not indulgent.

My father had always believed I had a book in me. He supported me while I stayed on the Isle of Wight for a month, in my early thirties. Only I was not yet ready to tell my story. I was still living in guilt and shame for some of the things that had happened in my

life. The cloak of shame I carried then was far larger than the stylish Bohemian cape I wore at Mindvalley, aged 58.

In my thirties, I felt like I had let down so many of the people who had trusted me. I felt as if I was a disappointment to my parents. I had disappointed the communities that had taken me in and had accepted me so lovingly for who I was, a young, idealistic girl trying to make a difference in the world.

When I was 32 and living in the United Kingdom, all I had written was a poem. It was called *An African Abroad*, and was searingly beautiful. It celebrated all the things I missed about the incredible country that had shaped so much of my identity. Only then, as I sat at the little coffee shop on the Isle of Wight overlooking the boats bobbing in the marina and the dark grey clouds rolling in, the words would not come out. They were still locked inside, together with the anguish in my brooding, complex curiosity. I felt so alone, so solitary. I was not ready then.

I returned from the United Kingdom, many kilograms heavier, not carried in a suitcase, but in the weight that clung to my hips, a bit like Liz Gilbert post-pasta in Italy, in *Eat Pray Love*.

Now in my sixties, I was ready. I had lived, loved and learnt some really sobering lessons about life. I had experienced liberating journeys that had unlocked my strangled voice.

After Tallinn, I wrote a chapter in a book on feminine leadership, published in Canada by JB Owen's publishing company, Ignite. Once I had poured the words onto the pages, I secretly hoped that no one who knew me would read them. I mean, how much damage could it do, being truthful when the book was being published in Canada? It was just a fleeting glimpse of my life and only one aspect of it. It wasn't my entire life story. Just a bit of it.

But in that bit, something resonated. The words became a lifeline to a new way of being in the world. With JB's encouragement,

something beautiful happened. I finally felt like a writer. A crafter of emotions, images and meaning. It was only then that I knew that I was somehow meant to write.

The voice from God, the universe, my higher power, intuition, call it what you will, was affirmed through people's response to my words. I didn't think I had a story until I realized I had many stories.

I wrote a heartfelt letter called *Coming Home*. Mindvalley published it on their website ¹.

MORE SIGNPOSTS

It was a warm summer night in Johannesburg in February, six months after we had attended the conference in Tallinn, and after I had written a chapter in the book on feminine leadership.

I remember feeling confident that night. So different from the shy gawkiness I had felt in Tallinn. I had on strappy heels, a bright, colourful Bohemian dress and striking coral earrings. I had lovingly applied sun-kissed makeup that reflected my happy aura. It occurred to me that I had started dressing in brighter colours. Something had changed. The dark, mysterious cloak of my earlier years that prevented people from getting close to me had lost its grip and slowly dropped from my shoulders to the floor. I had walked away, leaving it on the floor. Discarded. No longer needed. No longer hiding.

That night we were meeting friends at a restaurant. I felt exuberant, confident and at peace with the world. As we sat down at the restaurant table, I caught the eye of an attractive young woman, in her early forties, I thought, looking intently at me. She kept on staring at me and glancing my way.

While we were waiting for our friends, I caught sight of a

¹ The letter appears at the end of this book.

beautiful lime-washed piece of furniture from Bali in the furniture shop right next to the restaurant. They were still open, even though it was early evening. I knew the shop because I had bought something there before. I loved the eclectic, arty pieces they seemed to source from all over the world. Since our friends hadn't shown up yet, I popped into the shop for a quick browse.

The young woman who had been staring at me, followed me into the shop. She came up to me and said, 'You have such an aura about you. Such a presence; you need to write and to speak so that you can teach others.' I was flabbergasted. I felt awkward.

'What do you do?' I asked. 'This,' she said, as she strode away. I never got her name. I do not know who she was or where she lived. If she ever reads this story, she will know I heeded her words.

FINDING MY VOICE

I attended my second Mindvalley summit in Pula, Croatia in 2019. I began to haltingly claim my voice a bit more. A dear friend of ours, Joni Peddie, had encouraged me to attend a meeting at the Professional Speakers Association of Southern Africa (PSASA). By this time, I had been exposed to the most incredible global speakers on Mindvalley stages. Some of them had irrevocably changed my life.

I remember that first meeting at the PSASA in Johannesburg. People greeted me warmly and asked my name. People hugged one another. There was exuberance in the air. Suddenly, I felt like I was home. It felt like the energy and calibration of my Mindvalley tribe had been transported back to South Africa.

As I listened to the speakers that night, something clicked. It was like a cog in a wheel catching the ratchet and propelling me forwards.

COMING HOME

In Tallinn, a young woman, Nicole Gibson, had burst on to the global stage. She was a fringe speaker, not yet on the main stage. There were many people in the auditorium that afternoon. Something in her write-up on the programme had caught their eye, as it had done mine.

She was slim, with tousled blonde hair and mesmerizing blue eyes. She wore ripped white jeans and sneakers, and a plain crisp white shirt.

She stood on stage without a single slide or any fanfare and asked us, 'Who here feels lonely? Despite all the hugs and the camaraderie and the tribe feeling, who feels alone?' She asked us to raise our hands. Silently, hands went up. The hall filled with the silent sentinels of loneliness.

She said, 'I am going to tell you a story about feeling alone.' She told us how she had battled severe anorexia in her youth. How she had walked around feeling like the proverbial huge elephant in the room, taking up all the space. Despite her emaciated frame. The team of doctors were despairing and her family lurched between anger (the anger born of helplessness), shame and confusion.

There was utter silence in the auditorium that afternoon. Everyone sat upright on the edge of their chairs. Nicole proceeded to tell us the story of her healing from her eating disorder. I was mesmerized. It felt as if she were peering into my soul, telling some of my story.

She told us how, one day, the headmaster of her school called her into his office. She wondered what she might have done wrong.

He shared a story of a former student who had struggled. He spoke about his regret for not intervening in a situation that then escalated to a crisis point. He assured her that he would not let that

happen again. She sat there frozen; wanting to cry and run at the same time. He looked at her, his gaze equally stern and loving.

He said, 'Nicole, do you know what my favourite thing to do is every day after school?' She shrugged wordlessly; her thin shoulders were hidden in the clothes hanging off her frame. 'My favourite thing to do, when I get home from work, is to have a beer,' he continued.

'I'll make you a deal,' he said, 'I'm not going to have a single beer until you reach your weight target. I don't care if it takes three months or three years. You are not alone on this journey.'

As I write this now, a tear falls silently down my cheek. Nicole touched something in me. Pain, a grief, so deeply hidden.

It felt as if she saw me. In telling her story, she saw all of us. It was as if she were talking to the younger version of Alison. My loneliness. My solitary introspection. My so desperately wanting to fit in, yet standing out in my awkwardness and self-doubt.

Nicole accepted her headmaster's challenge. She walked a journey to wholeness. Once she recovered, she travelled the length and breadth of Australia in a van to speak to isolated communities, hearing their stories and facilitating healing, one dusty town after the other.

Nicole Gibson went on to become the youngest ever Commonwealth Commissioner for Mental Health for the Australian Government, at the age of 21. Now, at 28, she is a global visionary who speaks all over the world, and leads a global movement called Love Out Loud. Whilst she is now known as a multi-award-winning social entrepreneur, Nicole prefers to see herself as an unstoppable messenger of love and human potential.

Nicole, I write this book in your honour. I write this book to honour all the speakers who have shaped my life from the stage and encouraged me to tell my story. To bring healing and

understanding in a world where cynicism and disillusionment are now the elephant in the room, but where love is the currency of understanding.

And so that night, when I attended my first PSASA meeting, I glanced up at the banner at the entrance to the small room. It had a picture of a microphone with a fire behind it. Nicole Gibson had ignited something in me. I had often been asked to speak at funerals. I had always loved celebrating the significance of someone's life. The values they had lived by. Their contribution to the world.

Now I realized I did not want to speak about the dead. I wanted to speak to the living. I continued to read the banner. The hashtags at the bottom read:

- #Collaboration
- #Co-create Amazing
- #Celebration

The final one read:

- #Come Home

It was the final sign. I was home. This is my story.